

CHAPTER 16-A: READING AND WRITING VISUAL ARGUMENTS

This chapter presents concepts and tactics for understanding visual arguments and objects:



- *How* words and images work together
- *Why* the intention of the image's creator does not determine its meaning
- How the history of an image can determine its power
- How the viewer's experience, beliefs, and values shape the meaning of an image
- How images organize the world's meanings — political, religious, scientific, informational, and artistic

READING ARGUMENTATIVE IMAGES

Words and images work together

For centuries, writers and artists have collaborated to produce books, pamphlets, and other paper publications. But with the rise of the internet, images have grown more important. They preside over web pages, iPhone apps, advertisements, comic books, graphic novels, and computer screens, and billboards. The images have to be read as carefully as we read printed words.

Reading an image begins by asking about the purpose of the image. Is it meant to persuade, to convey information, or to express the artist's personal feelings and beliefs? These often overlap, but it is useful to think of them in three parts:

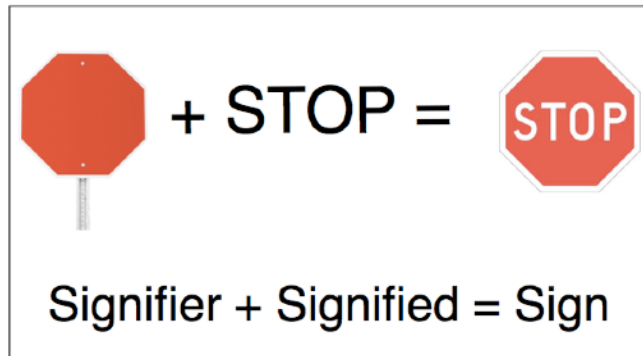
Signifier: the image

Signified: the concept the signifier represents

Sign: the link between the signifier and the signified

When a reader makes a connection between signifier and signified, it becomes a **sign**. Readers need to see images in terms of these parts. Think about a stop "sign." When it is blank, it is

really a “stop signifier.” But when the reader adds a concept (stopping), the “stop signifier” becomes a “stop sign.”



The critical *reader* actively creates new insights when reading words and when reading images. The effective *writer* creates opportunities for such new insights.

At first, the difference between signifier, signified, and sign may not seem important. However,



a change in either the signifier or the signified makes a difference. Look at the “stop war sign.” If you separate the parts of the *sign*, what would each part look like? What makes this a different sign? Does the reader have to know about traffic stop signs to understand this one? A sign always operates within a specific context.

The History of an Image

Reading an image often requires a knowledge of its history. For example, during World War II, women began to work in manufacturing jobs. Women had been excluded from such jobs, but they were suddenly needed to replace the men who had gone off to war. The image was part of U.S. propaganda to build support for the war. It celebrated the role of women as factory workers. Since then, it has been modified to become a sign with many different meanings. These meanings depend on what the reader sees as the signifier and the signified. Below, the original image is paired with its use in Sarah Palin’s Vice Presidential Campaign.



1943



2008

Critical readers pay close attention to the image, its history, its context, and its purpose. Begin by noting that the signifier seems almost identical in the images. The only difference is the face. Answer the following questions about *each* of the images above.

- When was the image created?
- What was happening at the time the image was created?
- Who was the audience for the image?
- What is the audience expected to know?
- What was the image intended to do?
- What is the signifier?
- What is the signified?
- What are the values and beliefs implied by the sign?

Images Have Consequences

Some citizens of Montreal are suspicious of the police. They express this attitude through graffiti and through the acronym “ACAB” (“all cops are bastards”). These images and words reveal some of the conflicts within this large Canadian city. In 2013, a woman took a photograph of a graffiti that showed Ian Lafrenière, the police department’s spokesperson, with a bullet wound to the head. She posted the image through Instagram. The police then arrested her for



making a threat against Lafrenière. To the police, the image and her post meant one thing, but to her, it meant something else. The police understand the Instagram image as a threat; she saw it as an interesting art object. Both the woman and the police were sincere in their claims. Thus, there is no point to an either-or reading of the image that tries to determine if it is a threat or not.

Images and Contexts

The meaning of an image depends on the audience. To understand the role of the audience, list the features of the image of Lafrenière (the signifier). Don't forget to include the fact that it is painted on a cement block wall and that graffiti is illegal.

1. Use the bulleted list from the question about the Sarah Palin image to assess the image from the viewpoint of the Montreal police.
2. Then, use the bulleted list again, but complete it from the viewpoint of the woman who saw it as an artwork.

The Intention is not the Meaning

In 1951, Ruth Orkin photographed her friend as she explored Florence, Italy. According to Orkin's daughter, they were illustrating the pleasures of travel. The photographs celebrated daily life as observed by American tourists. They became part of a story in *Cosmopolitan* about travel tips for women. Orkin's web site displays many of those photographs. A reader of her photographs might believe that they are signifiers for happy days.

However, the photograph did not become the sign that Orkin expected. It took on many meanings. For some people, it was a sign for what she intended: the pleasures of travel. For others, the image became a sign for an entirely different idea: that women are turned into objects by the leering stares of men. By the mid 1970s, it was a sign for the difficulty of the feminist struggle. Thus, the responses to the image are one way to understand what was normal



and acceptable in 1951, and what was normal and acceptable in 1975. To critically read this image, begin by building a careful list of the features that connect to these two different ideas of the normal and the acceptable. David Schönauer's, "[An](#)

[Image of Innocence Abroad](#)" discusses the evolution of the image's meaning.

Images and Contexts

Read Schonauer's essay (see link above). How do you respond to this image? What in your experience, values, beliefs, and expertise makes you read it that way? Is there a right way to read the image? A best way? What makes a reading credible?

READING INFORMATIVE IMAGES

Many documents rely on images to summarize information. A scientist's data, a troubling fact, or a complex process are often presented through charts and graphs. Some of the most basic software includes tools for creating visuals. Graphing tools are built into Microsoft's Excel, Apple's Numbers, and the Apache Open Office Spreadsheet. These are integrated into packages of software that include presentation software for creating visual representations of information. Readers benefit from images in two ways:

1. Summarizing information: they help readers understand the "map" offered by the document.

2. Creating discussion: the summaries expose the points where the document moves from information to an insight about the judgment. They identify discussion points.

Creating Discussion

Critical readers identify both the information summarized by an image and the discussion it



intends to encourage. The image for a proposed high speed rail system suggests the routes for such trains. This map only shows the cities served by such trains, and the routes are color-coded to emphasize connections they create. Not only does the image emphasize connections, but it provides a simple scale for measuring the time between

cities. These informative functions summarize the proposal. The light grey lines are the other

possible routes. By including these, the image suggests that the final decision on routes is still in the future. It is an invitation to discuss high speed rail systems for the United States. A critical reader would note that it focuses the discussion on who is served by the rail system. It does not discuss costs, environmental issues, or political pressures. Thus, it focuses the discussion.



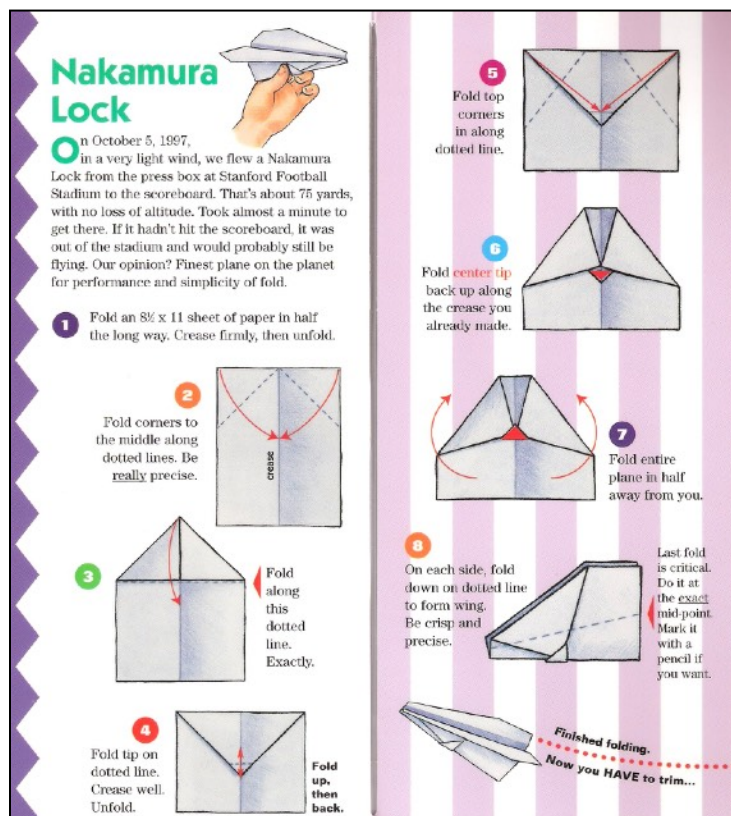
The subway map uses familiar details that help the reader recognize that high speed railway travel is similar to existing rail travel. It does this by imitating the maps of city subways. Many readers will be familiar with the use of thick colored lines to show subway

routes. These maps show only the basic geography of the city, the routes, and the stops. The subway stops are like the cities named on the railroad map. By using a format that is already familiar, the new idea seems less radical.

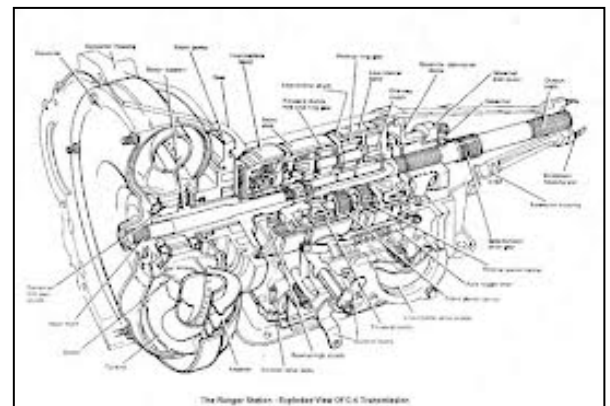
Images tell stories, summarize evidence, and focus the discussion. They simplify the presentation of the story. Graphic designers select designs that enable readers understand information. They eliminate distracting material to help focus the discussion that follows the reading. A critical reader examines images to understand both the information and the proposed discussion.

Summarizing Information

Technical manuals and instructions usually use images. These images emphasize information rather than discussion. They use a variety of charts, graphs, and schematics to summarize information. In the instructions for folding a paper airplane, the only discussion is in the opening paragraph. It makes a claim about the paper airplane being the best of a certain kind, but it makes the statement in the form of a question. In this example, the reader knows that the document does not involve expertise.



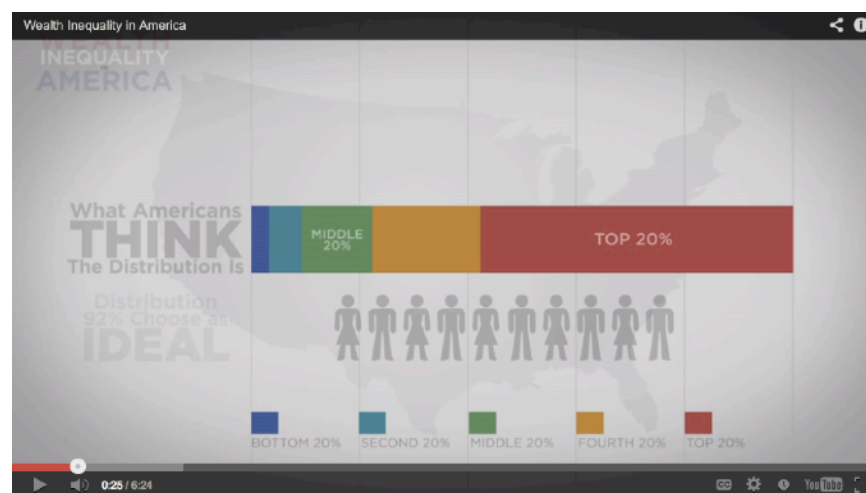
On the other hand, the schematic for assembling an automatic transmission suggests a high level of expertise. Critical readers quickly assess the level of expertise required by an informative image.



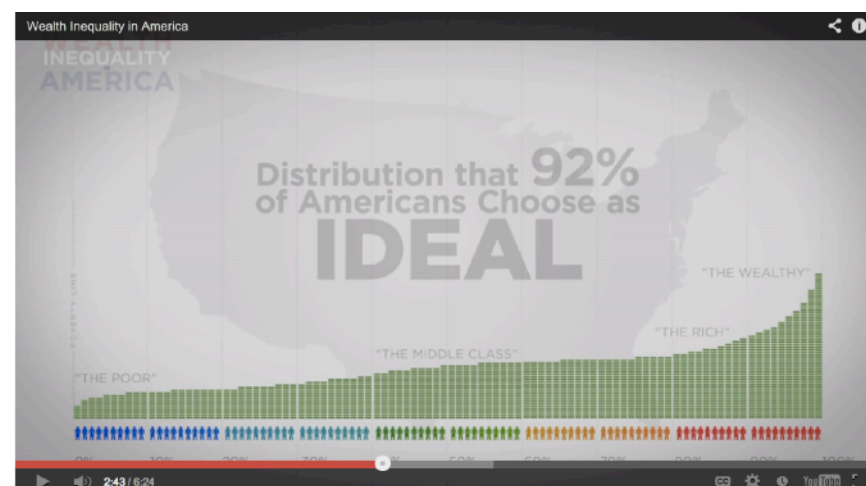
Summarizing Numerical Information

Counting, measuring, and comparing are important parts of many technical and scientific documents. Readers need to see the pattern of the data to understand what the researcher is doing. Readers also need to see what the researcher has chosen to compare. A good numerical presentation enables readers to do both those things. Such images take many forms: line graphs, pie charts, bar graphs, histograms, and other configurations.

Consider this graph of how people *think* wealth is distributed in America. The graph is simple.



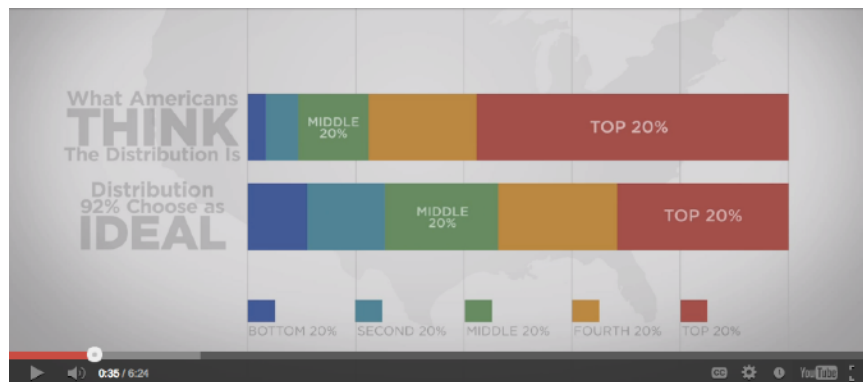
It divides a bar into color-coded sections. Usually, this kind of graph is shaped as a circle, the conventional “pie chart.” If the data is presented by itself, there is no reason to prefer a pie shape or a bar shape.



If the document wants to compare what people *think* to what they think is *ideal*, it has choices for the design of a second graph that shows what is really the case. The graph to the left seems to make sense. However, measuring wealth according to many more groups, makes

comparison difficult. A critical reader would wonder why the designer wants to hide the facts it reports by shifting the scale.

If the designer wants to clarify the difference between what people *think* is how wealth is divided in this country and what they believe is ideal, then the visual elements should be similarly designed. Notice how much clearer the contrast becomes when the design is similar:

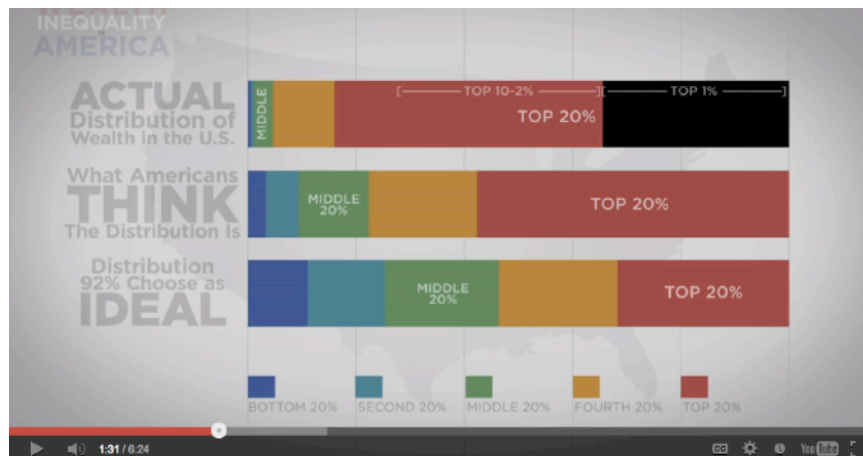


A critical reader would note that the differences are clear, and that this contrast seems to be leading to a point about wealth, fairness, and American life. The critical reader would probably not

be surprised to find a final chart that shows the *actual* distribution of wealth. It is presented in the same form as the other two bar charts to provoke discussion:

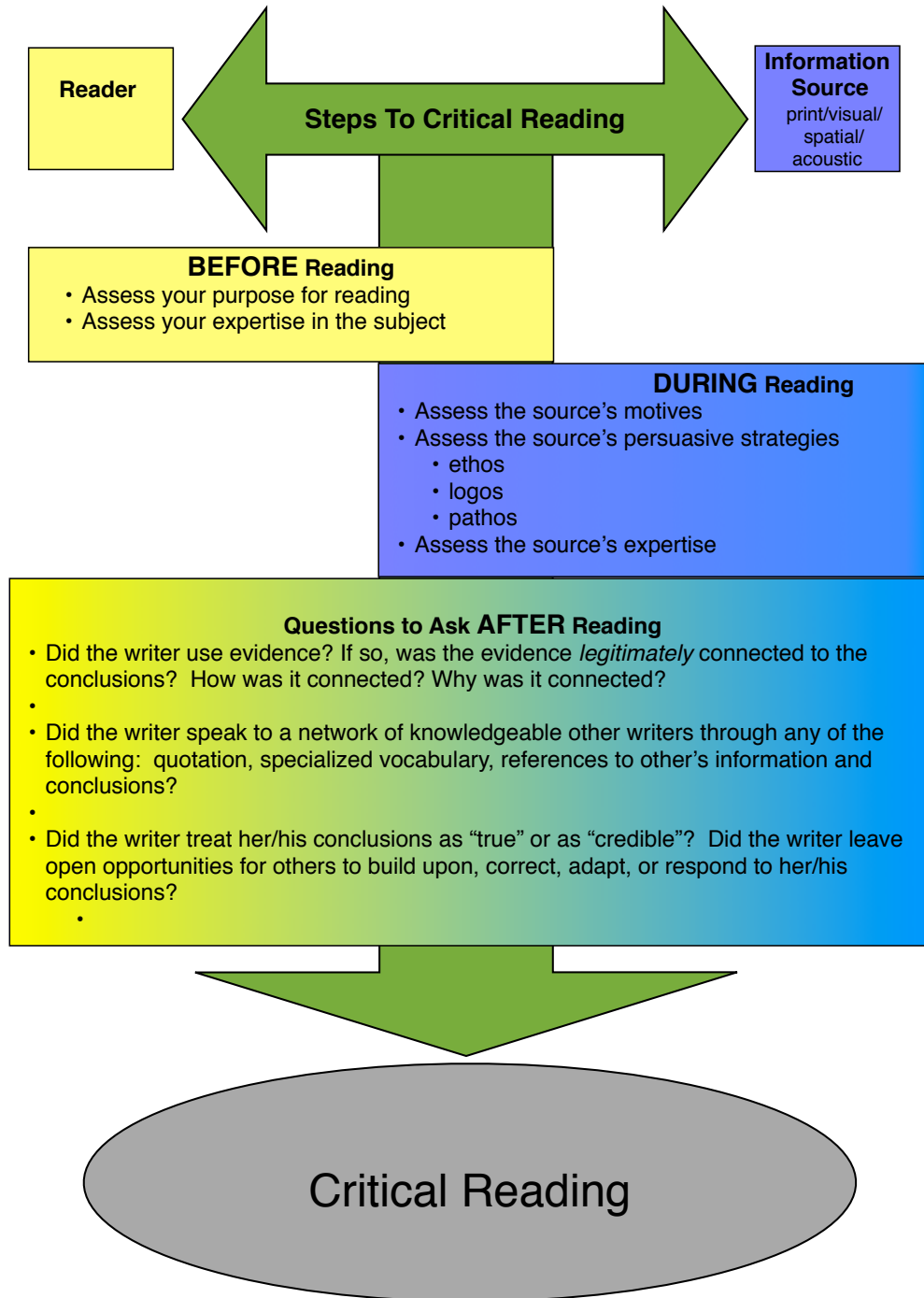
While these charts give information, the information also forces a discussion. Critical readers can recognize that these visual elements can never be only informative. Critical readers can see the story that the images tell.

Visual Design in the Real World



The chart above seems to be similar to the other bar graphs, but it introduces a new element: a black bar for the "TOP 1%." There is no color code for this new element. What does it suggest about the values and beliefs of the designer?

A FLOW CHART FOR CRITICAL READING



SUMMARY

Chapter 2 introduced the idea that writing can be compared to making a map. Writers begin by learning what others have already said about their topic. This established knowledge is a sort of map that is the launching point for the paper. Thus, a good writer begins by skillfully reading others' documents, images, and statements.

Critical reading is easier to do if you have key terms that help you recognize *how* a writer has constructed the paper. Critical readers identify the purpose, audience, and voice that shapes a document, and they can see when a document is relying on logic and evidence (logos), or on reputation (ethos), or on emotion (pathos). Understanding the existing map requires a specific kind of reading. Having a set of critical terms makes the task easier, and having a tool like the Terms, Expectations, and Questions (TEQ) Sheet is the first step in connecting critical reading with critical writing.